

# Culture, Religion, and Nature in *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta<sup>1</sup>

## Gita Mehta'nın *A River Sutra* Eserinde Kültür, Din ve Doğa

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### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a study of postcolonial novel, *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta from an eco-spiritual perspective. It includes the analysis of the ecological implications of Indian religions in it. It aims to explore Mehta's engagement with the postcolonial issues while dealing with the environmental issues, her presentation of the relevance of nature to the divinity, and her construction of the traditional idea of the unity of diversities and self in the natural and the social world against the Narmada Valley Project. In her stories in the novel, Mehta presents various timeframes and diverse religious beliefs and practices in Indian culture. These religions have played significant roles in defining every aspect of cultural practices and cultural identity. She explores how the British global capitalist imperialists' culture-nature dualism, which has sustained imperialist rule, has damaged the traditional bond between human beings and nature in India. She reflects a concern for the Narmada Valley Development Project of global capitalist imperialists, which aims to control the nature and has created the contemporary environmental problems around the Narmada River and fractured the traditional bond between nature and human beings. She reconstructs the co-existence of culture and nature and the Narmada River as the source of physical, cultural, and spiritual identities and survival of the Indian.

**Keywords-** *Eco-spirituality, Postcolonial ecocriticism, Culture-Nature Dualism, Religious Identity*

### ÖZ

Bu makale, Gita Mehta'nın sömürgecilik sonrası romanı olan *A River Sutra*'sını manevi ekolojik bir bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Romandaki Hint dinlerinin ekolojik içerimlerinin analizini içerir. Mehta'nın çevre sorunları ile uğraşırken sömürge sonrası konularla ilişkisini, doğanın ilahilikle ilişkisini sunmasını ve Narmada Vadisi Projesi'ne karşı, doğal ve sosyal dünyada çeşitliliklerin ve benliğin geleneksel birliği fikrini inşa etmesini keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Mehta romandaki öykülerinde Hint kültüründe çeşitli zaman dilimlerini ve çeşitli dini inançları ve uygulamaları sunuyor. Bu dinler, kültürel uygulamaların ve kültürel kimliğin her yönünü tanımlamada önemli roller oynamıştır. İngiliz küresel kapitalist emperyalistlerinin emperyalist egemenliğini sürdüren, kültürü -doğa ikiciliğinin Hindistan'da insanlarla doğa arasındaki geleneksel bağa nasıl zarar verdiğini araştırıyor. Doğayı kontrol etmeyi amaçlayan, küresel kapitalist emperyalistlerin Narmada Nehri kıyılarında günümüz çevre sorunlarını yaratan ve insan ile doğa arasındaki geleneksel bağını kıran Narmada Vadisi Geliştirme Projesi'ne duyulan endişeyi yansıtıyor. Kültür ve doğanın bir arada varoluşunu ve Hintlilerin fiziksel, kültürel ve dini kimliklerinin ve hayatta kalmasının kaynağı olarak Narmada Nehri'ni yeniden düzenliyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler-** *Manevi Ekoloji, Sömürge Sonrası, Kültür-Doğa ikiciliği, Dini Kimlik*

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## I. NATURE AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

This study intends to analyze the relationships between the natural environment and the diverse religious beliefs and practices in Indian culture. These religions have played profound roles in defining every aspect of cultural practices and cultural identity. They have had a great impact on the artistic, philosophical, and intellectual thoughts. Nature and culture have become interrelated: Indians' respect and protection of nature are part of their culture since the ancient times. The harmonious relationships between human and the Narmada River are revived in *A River Sutra*. Gita Mehta examines Indian life in terms of spiritual and ecological values. She highlights the relevance of divinity to human beings' awareness of their relationships with nature, the earth, and the universe, and to their direct experience of the natural environment. Indirectly, she protests the destruction of the culture, aesthetics, spirituality, and ecosystem by the Narmada Valley Development Project which is a symbol of rationality, science, technology, development, and globalization in post-colonial India. She creates a literary and legendary opposition to the control and management of the Narmada River. The Narmada River has spiritual significance in all Indian religions and philosophical systems such as Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism and indigenous animistic religions and Islam. The banks of the Narmada are the meeting points for these religions.

Mehta is one of the Indian writers who use certain aspects of the religious heritage to remind Indians of religious tolerance and of the importance of protecting natural environment for their physical and spiritual survival. She surveys meditative and ritual practices and the ancient tradition of respecting and preserving the sacred Narmada River as prospective models for deep ecology within diverse Indian religions.

[T]raditional religious practices and inherited interpretations of the meaning of nature and human-nature relationship can provide a critique of contemporary environmental attitudes and behaviours. In India, starting in the 1970s, certain aspects of the religious heritage have been used to promote a mobilization against further environmental degradation and to initiate healing of the environment. (Taylor, 2005, p. 823)

She emphasizes the connectedness, interrelationship, interdependence, and belonging that are the fundamental concepts of ecology and the essence of spiritual existence. Religions rooted in India encourage environmentally sensitive values and behaviours. That's why they are revised and recovered to provide a remedy to the environmental destruction in India and in the other parts of the world. From the ecocritical perspective, nature-related eastern religions have been ethically better than the Christianity of the western world, as they convey environmental concern and awareness. In contrast to the Christianity's anthropocentric destructive approaches, they encourage ecologically responsible perceptions and beliefs towards nature. In addition to the Indian writers, some of the western scholars have searched for the eastern religious and spiritual values to find a solution to the barrenness and wasteland of the modern life. They have discovered that the belief of the sacredness of nature and respect to it can inspire western people's forming a new living and thinking.

In *Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, Lynn White discusses the relationship between religion and environment. White identifies monotheistic, occidental religions, especially western Christianity, as a probable cause for environmental crises. "Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions [...] not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p. 10). For many ecocritics, Christianity has responsibility for environmental crises because of desacralizing nature and fostering anthropocentric ideas that draw a hard boundary between human beings and nature and sees human as superior to nature. Christian ideologies of domination and management of nature have shaped the modern science, technology, industry, and capitalism. "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion or rethink our old one" (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p.12). He offered eastern religions, which maintain a proper relationship with all life forms in the universe, as alternatives to find solutions to the environmental problems. He underlines that "[s]ince the roots of our [environmental] trouble[s] are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious" (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p.14). He proposes a spiritual revolution that celebrates wholeness and "the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man" (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p.14). This revolution is necessary to change our attitudes and behaviours towards ecology. The rediscovery of older and alternative philosophical, religious, and spiritual traditions and re-evaluation of eastern religions have inspired ecology. The spiritual aspect of all creatures and the holistic concepts integrated into ecology.

Spirituality and ecology are related to deep ecology. Deep ecology was coined by Arne Naess who was touched by the universal self-realization in the sense used by Gandhi. He suggested developing an "ecological-self" (Harding, 2010, p.81) that identifies not only with other human beings but also with other nonhuman species and ecosystem as a whole. The human being is a part of the universe and his self-realization developed through

identification with the other livings in the universe. Ecological-self calls for love for all the things in the universe. For Arne Naess, deep ecology is also known as ecosophy. By ecosophy, he meant a philosophy of ecological harmony. It is “an evolving but consistent philosophy of being, thinking, and acting in the world that embodies ecological wisdom and harmony” (Harding, 2010, p.42). Ecological harmony underpins diversities and reducing the diversity of an ecosystem can create an imbalance in it, as all the things in the universe depend on each other for their existence.

In *Deep Ecology and World Religions*, David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb (2001) study the relationships between World religions and deep ecology. They point,

[i]n the recent years the ethical and religious attitude of valuing nature for its own sake and seeing it as divine or spiritually vital has been called “deep ecology” ... Deep ecology has emerged as a response to what we have done to nature. (p.1)

Deep ecologists review the anthropocentric alienation, the arrogance of stewardship, mastery over nonhumans, inappropriate use of technology, industrial growth and materialist exploitation, degradation, and destruction of the natural world. They propose a fundamental change in worldviews by expanding morality and responsibility beyond the human beings. They advocate that the human being can only satisfy his basic human needs, but he cannot destroy the diversity of life. They suggest the inherent worth and diversity of all kinds rather than their usefulness to human beings. Deep ecological awareness and values, including the recognition of the authentic and fundamental value of nature, significance of protection of the biological diversity, and holistic, close, unified and non-dominant interactions, require spiritual awareness and values.

Deep ecology has influenced the eco-spiritual approach which has been developed to achieve self-realization through sensing the essence of human beings’ existence in relation to all the things in the universe. Fritjof Capra (2014) states

[w]hen the concept of human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence. (p.13)

Eco-spirituality, which builds on the ethics of sacredness of nature, the earth, and the universe, and on harmonious co-existence, interconnectedness, wholeness and holism, non-violence, and sustainability, is not a new thing for the Indian. India has been home to diverse religious beliefs and practices and nature has played an essential role in Indians’ spiritual life as the source of their spiritual survival in addition to their physical survival. There has always been a spiritual dimension in sustaining the connectedness with all the creation in the universe and in respecting and protecting nature. India has been a place for various indigenous tribes with their own religious traditions, expressions, myth, rituals, magic, and sacrifices. Mehta extends the historical scope of her novel by referring to the animistic and magical beliefs of one of these ancient indigenous tribes. The narrator manages a government rest-house nearby Vano village of tribal races “which held the Aryan invasion of India at bay for centuries in the hills” (Mehta, 1993, p.5). Before the arrival and sovereignty of the Aryans and the gods of the Aryans, tribes also had a culture and a snake kingdom, they “worshipped the Naga, the snake” (Mehta, 1993, p.143). Moreover, she surveys the serpent cult of the Vano people in the story of Nitin Bose and Rima. The indigenous tealeaf-picker woman, Rima is part of this indigenous tribe whose ruling deity is the snake goddess. This ancient, pre-Aryan tribe still exists in the north-eastern part of India and in order to find employment, many of the tribe people migrated to the tea plantations of Assam. Rima, whose teeth “pierced [Bose’s] skin again and again, like the sudden striking of a snake,” (Mehta, 1993, p.125) possesses the spirit of her lover Bose by performing ritual practices. The beliefs, ritual aspects of life, myths of this indigenous tribe connect its members to a world that indicates a living example of embedded deep ecology.

Another Indian religion that provides a living example of religion embeds deep ecology in Indian life is Hinduism. Mehta exposes to the Hinduism, which is known as the world’s oldest religious and philosophical system, is descended from the Vedic religion approximately three thousand years ago. Vedic religion was the religion of Aryans or Indo-Europeans of the northwest Indians in ancient India. With their migration to India from central Asia, Aryans integrated their religious beliefs and rituals into Indian culture and have shaped it for thousands of years. They brought an oral tradition that includes stories, chants, sacred hymns, myths, and oral history. Their oral tradition reveals a holistic perception of human being and nature so the need to care and protect nature is spiritually implied.

Aryans’ religious beliefs and practices were also described in their religious literature, particularly in their Vedas. Along with Vedas, Hinduism is the sum of religious beliefs, doctrines, and rites of the Brahmans, the Upanishads, Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. In other words, it consists of a vast variety of written texts

including sacred stories and heroic epics that make up the mythology of Hinduism. Mehta makes reference to these writings, the narrator says, “[w]e Hindus revere the spiritual teachings contained in our Upanishads” (Mehta, 1993, p.12).

Mehta refers to the traditional texts’ spiritual teachings that favour an ecological awareness and the meaning of life. In order to review deep ecology in the light of Hinduism, Mehta’s reflection of Hinduism’s perception of nature and including it within rituals is analyzed. The texts of Hinduism suggest an interrelated web of life that is one of the aspects of deep ecology.

In a Hindu context, deep ecology can be affirmed through reflection on traditional texts that proclaim continuity between the human order and nature, through ritual activities, and through applying meditative techniques that foster a felt experience of one’s relationship with the elements. (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 2001, p.74)

The vast diverse species are dependent upon each other; one is related to everything in the universe. In Hinduism, everything has an intrinsic value, and thus a piece of divinity within itself, so they are respected as integral parts of the universe. Hinduism calls for the human being’s responsibility to the universe by defining his place and role in the holistic perception of the universe. To determine the dharma, which covers the entire universe, Hinduism follows

celebration of the sacredness of nature in the Vedic tradition and responsibility for the welfare of the whole world (lokasamgraha) implied in the concept of dharma. It cares teachings of caring, loving, nurturing and protecting all aspects of the natural world. (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 2001, p.60)

These texts communicate their ideas through myths that are based on various ancient Aryan divinities. These divinities are associated with the elements in nature like sea, animals, plants, months, rivers etc.... The deification of the natural elements is reflected in the novel, “in the living stones of the Narmada, God is to be found” (Mehta, 1993, p.166). Rocks, pebbles on its riverbed are also transformed into the smooth lingams, the phallus of Shiva, which symbolize the regenerative aspect of Shiva. They are worshipped in family altars and temples. Minstrel’s song expresses this transformation of Shiva’s the male reproductive fluid into stones in the Narmada River: “Even Siva’s semen/Is cooled to stone in your riverbed/Each seed becoming/An idol wrested from your blue-black waters, /Worshipped with flower garlands/In the temples on your banks”(Mehta, 1993, p. 261). Mehta makes the reader to expose to enchanting mythical world of the divine in the oral and written traditions of the Hinduism.

Hindu mythological stories in the traditional texts shape every aspect of cultural life in India, such as, philosophy, arts, architecture, literature, laws, politics and religious practices. Worshipping the Imminent Being is the fundamental principle of Hinduism. Human beings are connected to the Imminent Being, known as Universal Soul or the Supreme Being. Hinduism follows the teachings of many gods and goddesses that are believed to represent different aspects of the same Imminent Being. The Imminent Being in Hindu faith is worshipped in three aspects: Shiva the destroyer, Vishnu the preserver and Brahma the creator. Each natural element such as the sun, river, and storm are believed to be the extensions of the Imminent Being. That’s why they have been defined as divine, respected and worshipped as specific idols, gods or goddesses for thousands of years. “[M]any of the gods and goddesses manifested themselves in natural phenomena; humans were linked to nature in a religious sense and in a holistic relationship” (Taylor, 2005, p. 823). Through natural elements Imminent Being acts and dances in the world. Hindus call creation as the dance of Shiva; the dancer and dance cannot be separated. Worshipping, a way of expression of love to the Imminent Being and reconstructing meaning, consists of some ritual forms such as meditation, puja, and pilgrimage.

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These rituals give meaning to the believers’ lives, invoke their place in the order of the universe, allow them to connect with the Imminent Being, reinforce the connections between them and the spirit realm, including, Sun, Moon, Earth and Waters etc...., which are divinized. As a result, the religious practices have been the ways to achieve self-awareness, inner peace and self-control and maintain ecological meanings.

In addition to Hinduism, the religious practices performed by Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and Sufis cultivate inner peace and provide self-awareness of one’s being part of the universe and embrace the holistic relationship between human and non-human. The main virtue of Jainism is ahimsa which means non-injury and non-violence to any living beings. The principle of non-violence, harmlessness associated with religious practices such as meditation influenced the non-violent policy of Gandhi. Buddhism’s ethical principle rejects animal sacrifices and



asks for mercy towards all living being. All these religions and the religious practices in India cultivate ecological and social sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and human survival and self-awareness of being part of the ecosystem.

Even though Indian religions promote environmental responsibility, India has experienced environmental degradation. As a result of colonial exposure, political, cultural, and ecological lives in India have been reshaped. Indians have learnt from the colonizers that nature, environment, and the whole universe exist to serve human beings. Moreover, a rationalized and ordered vision of nature that has been integrated into India was reinforced by scientific and technological progress and development, and political ideologies. These instrumental and beneficial approaches to nature damage their spiritual domain. Loving, caring, and respecting nature, environment, and the universe in Hindu scriptures have lost their importance. Indians have been disconnected from nature and they have lost their ecological awareness. "India and the Hinduism approach to environmental issues operate in a caring, inventive fashion, drawing from the tradition, yet recognizing the complexity of distinguishing between human need and human greed" (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 2001, p.73). The advents of technology, modernity, globalization, and capitalism have exploited natural resources and dominated daily life of contemporary Indian. Indians have experienced a rupture with their cultural roots.

Mehta intends to cure this rupture by recovering the insights and values of India's cultural heritage in her postcolonial novel. As a postcolonial writer, Mehta also writes back to the western imperialists to reflect the essence of the cultural heritage of India that has a comprehensible harmonious and holistic perception of the universe. She deconstructs their perceptions of "the other" in order to maintain cultural identity and to revive Indian's literal and aesthetic perceptions in the postcolonial world. In colonial literature such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the region of the Congo River is described as a place of darkness and horror by imperialists who looked at the river from outside the native tradition. Imperialists negated the Congo River's cultural, aesthetic, spiritual and physical significance common to the natives. They were interested in the commercial function of the river, as it took them to the hearth of the country, to the ivory, to profit, "what greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...the dreams of men, the seeds of commonwealths, the germs of empires"(Conrad, 2015, p.9). To disrupt the imperialist narratives of the colonized world, Mehta reimagines the river as distant from its ideological construction in imperialist literature and accounts. She induces life and agency into the Narmada River.

Mehta is one of the Indian writers who reflect the essential importance of the rivers in India from a literary perspective. She transforms the myths and the metaphor of the Narmada River in the scriptures to her postcolonial discourse. The Narmada is one of the rivers that are the sources of cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, and physical lives in the postcolonial world, such as Ganga in *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh, Honia, in *The River Between* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Nile in Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih etc. She makes religious connotations of the river as part of her narration. The Narmada River that has been celebrated by the Indian people since ancient times dominates the narrative of the novel as central location and symbol. Through symbols, Hindus expressed their understanding of being in the world. She provides an insight into all aspects of spiritual, cultural, and social life around the Narmada River. The human being was shaped by and within their surrounding environments in Indian culture; the place was important to their identity formation. She puts Indian people back into their natural surroundings. Both human and non-human affect and shape each other. Indian people's spiritual beliefs are decisive in their relations with the Narmada. She articulates the Indian worldview by recalling Indians' own mythic forms, symbols, motifs, and traditions. She explores the ancient and pre-colonial Indian perceptions of the non-human world that are infused in myths as an exigency for environmental ethics. She recovers the sacredness of nature, the earth and the universe, to inspire people to live within the confines of the interconnectedness, wholeness, and holism and to offer as an alternative view to engage in the environmental problems of the Narmada Valley Development Project. Deep ecology in this context considers the harmful effects of this project to stimulate a sense of connectedness with the environment

Her construction of holistic perception of Indian culture is brought out by the theme of love, the Narmada River, and traditional narrative style. *A River Sutra* is not similar to a traditional novel originated in western literature. Mehta applies the traditional narrative technique, that is, the forms of sutras of Indian literature in her novel. Different stories and people are held together by the traditional sutras: the river, the narrator, and the theme of love and the secrets of the human heart. Six individual stories are brought together by the narrator. The narrator functions as a mediating force that combines the various parts and stories. Mehta recovers traditional oral manner; the narrator appears as a storyteller and an auditor from the oral tradition. He reports and cites the diverse stories, which have been narrated to him by different narrators or Tariq Mia, to his auditors. These stories and characters,

that the narrator meets, provide wisdom to him rather than dictate something. This is described by Tariq Mia, the old Muslim scholar, “such people are like water flowing through our lives, little brother. We learn something from the encounter, and then they are gone. We never find them again”(Mehta, 1993, p.245-6). Each story with its distinct concern and context is a fragment of the main story, the story of the Narmada River that reflects the significance, complexity, profoundness, and subtlety of India’s spiritual and cultural life. Various myths, legends, belief, and rituals about the river are brought together in the modern context. The Narmada River is not only a setting or a background for each story. It functions as a spiritual sutra, a thread that connects diverse people and stories. The portrayal of the Narmada in each story reflects a different aspect of it such as a site of rituals, a resting place, as a symbol of purity and unity, and permanency, a peaceful coexistence, nonviolence, console, comfort, regeneration, as a deliverer and saviour of the human soul, as a destroyer of sins and as a metaphor for woman and friend.

## II. THE NARMADA RIVER AND ITS DIVINITY: CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE NARMADA RIVER

Mehta’s cultural consciousness shapes her writing. She recovers old and partially ignored sacred values that have essential meanings for the identity of Indians. She uses the cultural implications of the Narmada to articulate the significance of nature in Indian culture. She weaves different stories around the myth and rituals of the Narmada rooted in the culture. She tells the significance of the Narmada to save it from damming and to break down the dichotomy of nature/culture. Building dams on the river means the separation of nature and culture. She revives the historical and cultural worldview that prioritizes a reciprocal relationship between nature and culture. Glotfelty insists

all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnectedness between nature and culture, specifically cultural artefacts of language and literature. (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p.xix)

Ecocritical study of Mehta presents that relationship between the Narmada River and human culture.

Postcolonial ecocritics expand deep ecologists’ advocacy of respect for all forms of life to include diverse human culture, and their call for ecological sustainability to support social sustainability and human survival. Their neglect of the environment’s social aspects is recovered by postcolonial ecocritics. The need to protect or favour the respect for the universe sustains human being’s social, cultural, spiritual, and economic lives. Postcolonial people’s relationship to their environment negates the commodification of non-human world that dominates the western capitalist perception. Postcolonial ecocriticism engages with a social ecology that refers to the interconnectedness of human and all life forms for ecological and social sustainability. They believe that the richness, diversities, and co-existence in nature can be applied as a guide for co-existence of the diverse human cultures. In her insistence on the environmental welfare, Mehta reflects deep ecology’s concerns of co-existence, holism, non-violence, love, respect, and sustainability and expands these concerns to unify diverse cultures in India by using the significance of the Narmada River in these cultures.

Mehta uses the traditional spiritual and religious perceptions, concepts, views, and the image of the rivers. The connection between spirituality and nature has deep historical roots in India. From the ancient times, Indian civilizations have valued rivers that have provided their physical and spiritual needs. Along with their banks, human beings have settled, and civilizations have been grown, developed, and disappeared, fertile fields stretching for miles on its banks nurtured these civilizations. Rivers are not just sources of their physical survival; they have been sources of their spiritual and cultural identities as well. In the myths of their sacred texts such as Rig Veda, the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Brahman, rivers of India are mentioned as parts of Indian culture, as symbols of divinities. Indian people have gone to the rivers to wash, to cleanse their souls and to pray. The Narmada River is the holiest of the seven holy rivers of India. Its valley is rich with the diversity of spiritual beliefs. Mehta reveals the significance of the Narmada River in these beliefs. Mehta presents a cultural critique of recent environmental and cultural degradation of The Narmada Valley Development Project. This project as a part of national development is not compatible with ecosystems and with the harmonious and respectful coexistence of life forms.

In the first chapter, Mehta presents ongoing relationships between the indigenous people in India and the Narmada River. Indigenous people believe that their relations with the entire universe are built on the spiritual and physical sustainability. She presents a vision of Vano tribal village which is on the riverside of the Narmada River. The river and the jungle on its banks are sources of their physical survival. Vano women collect food, water, and fuel for their cooking fires. The banks of the Narmada appear as home and shelter to Vano people that are remnants

of pre-Aryan tribal people of this region. Their relations with nature are not based upon stewardship or managing it. On his morning walk, the narrator enters the jungle that includes great trees such as teak, peepul, banyan, mango, and wild animals that were “glorying in their brief possession of the jungle” (Mehta, 1993, p.5). Even wild animals pass the way undisturbed by any tribal woman collecting firewood. All life forms in nature co-exist harmoniously. The proximity of the tribal inhabitants of the jungles to natural elements is embedded in their culture. They still use plants and animals in their traditional medicines and magic, although they have lost their significance in contemporary India due to scientific and technological progress.

Moreover, the river and the jungle on its banks are sources of the indigenous people’s spiritual survival in ancient and contemporary times. Vano people’s “philosophy was based on a profound respect for nature and their inter-dependence of all life” (Mehta, 1993, p.145) so they live in an ecologically sensitive way. They believe that all life forms in the universe including inanimate objects have spirits, so they listen, care, love, and respect all of them. They have developed ethics of non-violence and a harmonious use of natural resources. The Narmada River has been valued as the spiritual realm for Vano tribal people. They have worshipped the Narmada River as a powerful goddess who has an individual identity and recognizable attributes. In ancient times, they believed that they governed a great snake kingdom until the gods of the Aryans overthrew them. Mehta adopts the mythology of the snake goddess who resides in lakes, rivers, and sea. For thousands of years, Vano villagers have worshiped the goddess, in the form of a stone image of a half woman and half snake. Their goddess is the personification of desire. They have a faith that desire is the source of life and the principle of love. “[W]ithout desire there is no life. Everything will stand still. Become emptiness. In fact, be dead” (Mehta, 1993, p.135). They beg to their goddess to pardon the people who refused and ignored the intensity of the desire. Pilgrims chant “solutions in the morning and at night to thee, O Narmada! Defend me from the serpent’s venom” (Mehta, 1993, p.6). Serpent’s venom symbolizes the physical and spiritual pollution of rationalist human beings who deny the power of desire. Vano people believe that the Narmada can purify their souls that are corrupted by human culture and materialistic love and relations. They believe in the healing power of nature that the river can annul the effects of snakebites and cure many fatal diseases and madness. Moreover, after losing their struggle against the Aryans, they found a shelter and a refuge on its banks; the river has become a source of solace to them. Vano people have faith in the magical power of the Narmada River. It functions as a bond between human beings and the energy of their goddess. The divine embodiment of the Narmada River kept them from the annihilation. Mehta reflects the spiritual survival of the indigenous people in relation to the Narmada River in ancient and contemporary India.

In Indian culture, the Narmada River is the source of the renewal of life. It functions as a metaphor for a healer, a regenerative and purifying agent. This is reflected in *The Executive’s Story*. The indigenous legend of the Narmada River merges with Nitin Bose’s story. Nitin Bose was a well-educated and westernized tea merchant. When he was in Calcutta, he witnessed the crowdedness and dirtiness of the city and the exploitations and devastation of nature. He did not feel the suffering of crowds and the poor in the city. His lack of concern or pity for other people and the environment resulted from his lack of holistic perception in his materialistic world. He satisfied his personal desires and pleasures through the golf, drinks, Chinese meals, race, and meaningless adulteries. He had an idea “success lay in imitating the Anglicized aloofness of our superiors who assured us the city had passed the point of no return” (Mehta, 1993, p.109). That’s why he preferred the solitude of the remote tea estate. While directing plantation of tea on the deserted low hills at the bottom of the Himalayas, he became interested in tribal customs. “I discovered mythology with the very idea in which my tea estate situated, legends of a vast underground civilization stretching from these hills to the way to the Arabian sea, peopled by mysterious race half-human, half serpent” (Mehta, 1993, p.114). The indigenous people’s spiritual relationship with the river has been a part of their daily life; they present their ceremonies, rituals, prayers, and sacrifices to the river. Contemporary perception of tribal spiritual practices as “the dark forces of the jungle” (Mehta, 1993, p.92) is reflected in Nitin Bose’s story. The mythological legends and the folk tales of demons, sages, gods, lovers, cosmologies, which were described as dark forces by the rationalists, haunted him. As a result, he could not distinguish the reality from those mythical stories.

After a while, Bose fell in love with a tribal tea-leaf picker girl called Rima. Rima drew him into a world of dream. He imagined that a serpent-like woman from myths came to his bed every night to make love with him in darkness. He could not distinguish whether she was real or not. This sensual tribal girl haunted his mind and soul. He was intoxicated by the pleasure of evoking desire. “[He] was sick with love as if [he] had been pierced by all five arrows of desire” (Mehta, 1993, p.120). He became dependent on this girl for fulfilling his sexual desires. In addition to awaken his senses and desires, this girl’s body thought him the secrets of nature. He comprehended why this place was called Kamarupa, the God of Love’s kingdom. When Nitin Bose got knowledge

of her being a coolie's wife, he was disgusted at her, and he said "[t]hat I should love a coolie's wife. Waves of disgust engulfed me, and I wanted to vomit with shame" (Mehta, 1993, p.124). He rejected the power of desire and suppressed his desire, as his relationship with a coolie's wife was unacceptable in the society. After returning to the city, he was unable to tolerate his shame and desire. He believed that he was possessed by the love ballads of the tribal Rima and his soul was conjured by the magic of Rima. For him, "desire is some kind of magic performed with black arts. But desire is the origin of life. For thousands of years, our tribal people have worshipped it as the goddess" (Mehta, 1993, p.136). His ignorance of the power of desire and suppression of his desire caused his madness.

Mehta illustrates the healing power of the river in the mystic and spiritual philosophy of the indigenous people. Nitin Bose walked in the jungle to follow Rima during the eclipse of the moon by calling her name, he lost his sanity. The priest of the tribal village advised him to pray the goddess at the shrines on the riverbank of the Narmada River because the divine personification of the Narmada can cure the madness of those who are possessed. His uncle sent him to the narrator's rest house, as he thought that the tribal people near the rest house could help him liberate his possessed soul by using their ancient rituals. Vano villagers enacted their inherited pre-Aryan mystical rituals at the shrine, which is a big banyan tree. They begged their goddess to pardon Mr. Bose for his ignorance of desire under open sky. To worship, they waded in the water raising their hands and turning their faces to the west to chant "[s]alutations in the morning and at night to thee, O Narmada. / Defend me from the serpent's poison" (Mehta, 1993, p.139). Nitin Bose took refuge in the Narmada River where he immersed a mud image of the goddess of desire to free his possessed soul. This symbolizes his submerging his rejecting the power of desire into the water. The Narmada calmed down his desires and linked him to the power of Shiva. "Then he changed you into a river/ to cool the lusts of holy men/And called you Narmada, /Soothe of desires" (Mehta, 1993, p.261). With these chanting, Mehta makes reference to one of the most known myths of the Narmada's birth. According to it, when "Shiva, Creator, and Destroyer of worlds, was in an ascetic trance", his intense concentration made "rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills" (Mehta, 1993, p.8). The overflowed sweat accumulated in a tank and started flowing in the form of a river.

The stream took on the form of a woman- a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetic to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at a moment as lightly as a dancing girl, at another as a romantic dreamer, at yet another as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire. Her inventive variations amused Shiva that he named her Narmada, the Delightful One. (Mehta, 1993, p.8)

In Hindu mythology, Narmada is sacred due to its origin; it is the daughter of the Hindu God Shiva. Shiva named it Narmada that means pleasure giver in Sanskrit language. Shiva blessed her with immortality, so she is forever holy, sacred, active and endless. "O Messenger of Passing Time... You dissolve the fear of time itself" (Mehta, 1993, p.263). In addition to the healing power of the Narmada River, Mehta refers to its purification power. It is believed that a dip in this river and even a view of it cleanses all sins, "a mere glimpse of the Narmada's waters is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births" (Mehta, 1993, p.144).

For the desperate and miserable people and social outcasts, the river provides a shelter, refuge, and home from their busy and corrupted materialistic lives. It is a place of respite, recreation, and repose for those who want to remain alone and experience spiritual peace. Ecospirituality deals with human being's escape from a consumerist and materialistic society. *A River Sutra* begins with the nameless narrator; he was one of the people who came on the banks of the Narmada for consolation. He was a retired bureaucrat, and he was assigned as the manager of a rest-house on the riverside of the Narmada River. After his wife's death, he intended to pass his remaining life in the natural environment. He headed to the upper reaches of the river to live his forest retreat stage of life. "The bungalow's proximity to the Narmada River was its particular attraction" (Mehta, 1993, p.2). He was withdrawn into nature with a profound desire to retreat from the corruption of the technological and materialist world. He said, "[b]ureaucrats belong too much to the world and I have fulfilled my worldly obligations. I am now a Vanaprasthi, someone who has retired to the forests to reflect" (Mehta, 1993, p.1). Vanaprastha is one of four stages of human life stated by Hindu scriptures. After completing the phases of the infantile, the student, the householder, he enters the stage of hermits in the forest "to seek personal enlightenment" (Mehta, 1993, p.7). In Hinduism, if one lives in all stages according to the rules, duties, and responsibilities, he will obtain salvation.

The narrator searched for spiritual restoration, peace, respite, and solitude, so he chose the banks of the Narmada. He appreciated the river as he is on a spiritual quest. "[T]he purpose of the journey is to attain a new relation to nature as the springhead of energy, peace and a meaningful life" (Kundu, 1999, p.5). On his journey, he questioned his own beliefs and searched for an authentic identity that was related to nature. "[T]he river has become the object of [The narrator's] reflections" (Mehta, 1993, p.3). That's why, he meditated looking at it every



morning to free his soul, “a great aid to [his] meditations is the beauty of [their] location” (Mehta, 1993, p.3). In his meditations, he frequently heard the river’s heartbeats from the deep in underground. He mediated to free himself from the cycle of rebirth and death and achieve a holistic existence. “Ritual worship performed by meditators and temple priests includes veneration and internalization of the elements, a sanctification of the body that leads to identity with divine power” (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 2001, p.63). He is one of the characters who feel nature and the energy of the universe by means of the rituals of ascetic withdrawal and meditation.

In addition to his withdrawal and his meditations, the narrator’s encounters with the other characters and their stories are significant to perceive a holistic existence. In Hinduism, the places that have sacred associations are regular destinations for pilgrimages. The narrator’s rest house is near The Narmada River which has holy pilgrimage sites and temples all along its banks. Pilgrimage to the Narmada is a spiritual practice so there is always a flow of pilgrims passing through its banks. Although the narrator came to this place to meditate and forget all worldly ties and issues, he encountered many different persons or their stories on his spiritual journey. Mehta presents the rituals of pilgrimage to the Narmada.

Sacred places, objects, or forms of art. However, are more than just tools or techniques to facilitate the experience of belonging? They are always integral parts of rituals, and it is those rituals that are the doorways to mystical experience. (Capra and Luisi, 2014, p.282)

The Narmada is the only river in India to be graced for the ritual of parikrama that allows one to experience mystical experience. Parikrama is a full circumambulation of the Narmada River on both banks. This circumambulation which begins at the mouth of the river on the Arabian Sea takes approximately two years. This is similar to the circumambulation of Muslim pilgrims around Kaaba. The pilgrim follows a clockwise journey on foot around the holy Narmada at his right hand by maintaining some challenging and arduous formalities and rules in a humble manner. He can take only essential things with him; he can survive by begging for food. However, the consequences of their parikrama are noble and prosperous.

[W]ith clear resonance of Chaucer, [the novel] compromises the tales of visitors (most of them pilgrims) at a remote rest house on the Narmada river; these stories are interwoven with the framing narrative presented by the resident hostel overseer- a bend then, of the figures of ‘Chaucer-the-pilgrim’ and ‘the host’ in the Canterbury tales-whose voice ensures that the individual tales fall into one coherent pattern and collaboratively evoke a multi-religious India held together by the common denominator of convivial spirituality (Wiemann, 2013, p.160).

One of the temples dedicated to Lord Shiva is visible from narrator’s terrace. At sunset, white-robed pilgrims descended from the stone-steps of the Mahadeo temple to reach the river’s edge, they walked on the banks, and they floated their clay lamps downstream for the evening devotions. “As the twilight deepens, [the narrator and bungalow guests] can see the water at Mahadeo stars flickering with tiny flames as if catching fire from the hundreds of clay lamps floated downstream for the evening devotions” (Mehta, 1993, p.4). They were surrounded by the harmony of the river. Every dawn the narrator sat in the darkness and faced the underground spring of the river, Amarkantak. He imagined the ascetics devotees reached out the holy tank of Amarkantak to the birth and the origin of the river because they believed even a sight of the river cleanses their souls. He imagined the ascetic devotees sitting in the dark like himself, and imitating their god, Shiva with their ash- stained naked bodies and their matted hair. Shiva is represented in various forms; one of them is as a naked ascetic. This is part of their self-realization as the extension of Shiva. He imagined their meditations on Shiva by chanting, “Shiva-o-ham, Shiva-o-ham, I that am Shiva, Shiva am I” (Mehta, 1993, p.5). This mantra is repeated in the novel. Ascetic devotees’ selves are elevated to Shiva, and they identify themselves with the source of energy from which the whole universe emerged through asceticism. The holism of the entire universe is articulated, and all human beings are part of that creative source since Shiva is seen in all forms of life.

While going to Tariq’s village, the narrator met one of the Jain travellers as there are ancient Jain caves on the road. The Jain monk, Ashok “who had only recently renounced the world” (Mehta, 1993, p.9) told his story to the narrator. The monk represents Jain devotee; he told about Mahavira, the pioneer of the Jain religion whose principle of non-violence affected eco-spiritualists. The monk was a slender figure robed in white muslin; he wore a mask in order not to kill some blameless insects by sudden inhalation. He hesitated to harm a tiny living thing of the web of creation. He disclosed how he had become tired of the materialist world that offered him a luxurious life in his past life. “My life of unremitting pleasure ceased to satisfy me, leaving me exhausted from the last indulgence while anticipating the next” (Mehta, 1993, p.27). He sacrificed his wealth, comforts of luxurious living, family, and friends to follow Mahavira’s principles, to renounce the world.

Through *The Monk’s Story*, Mehta refers to the exploitation and manipulation of natural resources. She traces the reality of diamond mining, the story of human desire to control nature and “the other” for profit. The

monk was a wealthy diamond merchant's eldest son; he would inherit one of the biggest diamond companies in the world. This included the diamond mines, cutters, auctions trading houses, and bank accounts all around the world. His merchant father symbolizes wealth, pleasure, and power. While travelling over the world with his father to understand the diamond trade, he witnessed the hard life-conditions of the diamond miners, he saw twisting streets, open gutters, dingy wooden shack, and squalor of the bazaars. He was distressed by the dehumanizing prosperity of diamond trade; the poverty, hunger, and death of miners were in contrast to the non-violence of Jainism. He realized that their wealth has sustained by violence and his father, the follower of Jainism, was a cynical and insensitive materialistic person. He criticized his father's hypocrisy, "how can you worry about a dead insect more than you care about a human being?" (Mehta, 1993, p.23) He told the narrator, "for the first time I had recognized that wealth had excised my father's emotions, freeing him to examine people as if they were abstractions" (Mehta, 1993, p.23). Since then, his attitude to his father has changed. The inhuman nature of his father's philanthropy during renunciation ceremonies frightened him.

The monk hesitated to inherit his father's business and his inhuman and cynical life. "He could never return to anaesthesia of wealth that numbed [him] to the suffering that could make [him] human" (Mehta, 1993, p.33). He was eager to experience Mahavira's teachings and sufferings. Without suffering, he could not understand the non-violence of ahimsa or be free from the corrupted world. He "longed for the freedom to find this state of bliss" (Mehta, 1993, p.19). He wished to be free from doubt, delusion, extremes. He believed that renunciation could release his energy "like a dammed river waiting to be released" (Mehta, 1993, p.29). If he was bounded to the role which society required him, he could not be free. He chose to be a social outcast and he avoided human vanity, denied human shame, and survived on charity. It was hard for him to prefer ascetic renunciation from the world of material prosperity. However, he could be free to pursue the secrets of the human heart, "[t]he human heart has only one secret. The capacity to love" (Mehta, 1993, p.45). He searched the capacity to love. He realized his connection to other things in the universe by leading a simple life away from the materialistic world. The monk's renunciation did not simply mean the rejection of the materialist world; it disclosed his experience of ahimsa and his holistic perception of life. His remorse for his decision that hurt his family and his discomfort for the extravagancies of renunciation ceremonies brought out his compassion for everyone and everything. He said "I was overcome by compassion for him [his father], for myself, for my concerned and curious wife, for the human helplessness that linked us all. It was my first experience of ahimsa." (Mehta, 1993, p.32). His feeling of compassion for them was his first experience of ahimsa. This eco spiritual perception is applied for self-realization and global humanism.

The monk followed parikrama, gained complete devotion and veneration for the Narmada on his walk, and identified himself with ascetic Mahavira who endured extreme hardships as a divine beggar. In his journey for the discovery of spiritual truth and his true inner self, his relationship with the river is significant. "[P]ilgrimage is endurance. Through this endurance, pilgrims hope to be bound to the energy of the universe, as the Narmada River is thought to link mankind to the energy of Shiva" (Mehta, 1993, p.7). He regained the energy of universe and holism through his ritual of visiting the river; it provided a link with the deities, a spiritual renovation, inspiration, and solace, that he would be directed to the next Creation. Christopher Key Chapple describes a similar journey, "this journey through the relationship between body and the elements to the point of unity with the goddess brings the mediator to a point of visionary immersion, a form of profound and deep ecological awareness" (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 2001, p.64). The monk tried to get the meaning of his existence isolated from the greed of materialist world and took a journey into his inner world that found a connection and harmony with the cosmos.

The narrator does not understand the meaning of his renunciation due to his faith and desire, as his own withdrawal from his active social life was guided by reason. And Tariq Mia commented that the monk's story reflects the secrets of the human heart. Tariq Mia was the Muslim mullah of a mosque adjoining the tomb of Amir Rumi in a Muslim village beyond the valley. He tried to teach him that desire was the source of life and the interaction in the web of creation brought peace and solace Mehta presents Islam's tolerance for other beliefs, its relationship with nature, especially with the Narmada. For example, Nawab of Shahbag, the Muslim ruler, also honoured the holiness of the Narmada by chanting, "the Narmada purifies with a single sight of her waters. Salutations to thee, O Narmada" (Mehta, 1993, p.155). She enriches the narrative of the novel through the references to Sufi mystics, teachings, and songs. "Indo-Sufism based on the concept of mystical love with two central tenets: striving to unite with God by following the Way under the direction of a spiritual guide, and ecstatic intuition of divinity through God's illumination" (Mehta, 1993, p.275). One's love for other human or non-human beings relates him to Allah as all the web of creation is the reflections of Allah. Amir Rumi was a Sufi devotee of the sixteenth century. His cult of love has embraced all the communities. From all over India, Qawwali singers

come to Rumi's tomb to sing their ecstatic songs. These songs intensify love and move their listeners to dance with the religious rapture in which God is found. Through music, they experienced holism.

Mehta presents the power and magic of music that has a soothing, healing effect on the characters. In *The Teacher's Story*, Tariq Mia reported the tale of Master Mohan, a music teacher, and a gifted blind singer. Master Mahon had an unhappy life as his greedy wife always mocked him for being poor. She blamed his weakness and stupidity for their poverty. He took a blind boy, Imrat, as his pupil as Imrat's sister requested him to look after her brother for a while. His love for the boy was based on the master-pupil love that reminds the love of Rumi and Shams. On the other hand, his wife and children tortured, abused and shrieked the boy; he was unable to endure their rudeness, so he leaves the house with the boy to practice in the great park that is the centre of Calcutta. The boy sang his Sufi songs of love to God, "can you not see / Only love disfigures me? (Mehta, 1993, p.68) Moreover, he instructed him to sing the songs of Kabir, Mirabai, Khusrau, Tulasidas, Chisti, and Chandidas. "Sings Kabir, 'O seeker, find God / in the breath of all breathing'" (Mehta, 1993, p.69). Kabir invited the devotee to seek God not in the temple or mosques but in all livings created by God. Sufism builds on love and sympathy for all beings and non-human because God exists in all things, everything in the universe is the extension and reflection of God. This echoes Yunus Emre's mystic song, "I love the web of creation for the sake of the creator." These songs remind that one can achieve self-realization, through their love of other beings and care for them. Imrat sang the devotional songs to the people around to praise God and his creation, as well as these songs helped them to endure the corruption and indignities of materialist world. His singing drew the attention of music recording companies. When his song made the hall full of pleasure and mysticism, one of the owners of them cut his throat. After the death of Imrat, Mohan fled from the cruel, loveless, and greedy modern society and he came to the roadside tomb of Amir Rumi near the riverside of the Narmada. Even though the Narmada is the giver of solace and peace to the suffering people, he committed suicide by throwing himself under the train to release himself from the miserable cycles of life and from the evil of human beings: "it is only a story about the human heart" (Mehta, 1993, p.86).

Besides the innocent devotional Sufi music that attracted people and drove them into the trance in which God is found, Mehta presents insights into the devotional classical music of Hinduism that includes several songs of the Narmada with the theme of holism, unity, desire, and consolation in *The Musician's Story*. In this story, she refers to the significance of the Narmada in human being's spiritual, intellectual, and musical development. The musician's daughter told her own story to the narrator. Her father was a famous, talented, and devoted music teacher. He did not teach his art of music to anybody. He accepted to teach his disciple how to play music if he promised to marry his daughter who was very ugly. The disciple and daughter created a dialogue of desire through music. However, the desire was manipulated, and the disciple cheated her by marrying another girl. The Musician, her father, reminded her of the mythological story that The Narmada is cheated by her lover, Lord of Rivers and remained virgin. He recommended her to console her pain and search for true love that was not moved by human passion. He encouraged his daughter to channel her sorrow into a richer music: "[r]emember, if I teach you the raginis I will be giving you as wife to my gods, the gods of music. Such a contract cannot be broken. It will be a marriage sealed by Shiva himself" (Mehta, 1993, p.203). He told about the expression of desire for a lover, grief for the loss of the beloved in the music along with the legends of Shiva and Parvati, Barari, Lilavati, Bhairav, Madhu-Madhavi. The stories include Veena and the seven notes of the music maintain the spirituality of the love. He said,

[t]here was no art until Shiva danced the Creation... Music lay asleep inside a motionless rhythm-deep as water, black as darkness, weightless as air. Then Shiva shook his drum. Everything started to tremble with the longing to exist. The universe erupted into being as Shiva danced. The six mighty ragas, the pillars of all music, were born from the expressions on Shiva's face and through their vibrations, the universe was brought into existence. (Mehta, 1993, p.195)

These six ragas encouraged the harmonious co-existence of all living things. Music and life could not exist without desire so six wives were given to them to teach them love, live and multiply. The music highlighted the creation of a composition from their union. "The world is envisioned as the interplay or "dance" of male and female energies" (Taylor, 2005, p.828). Like music, nature has a rhythm in accordance with the wholeness. Through music, she could understand the universe and the true power of nature.

The father taught his daughter to listen to nature to learn music. He made her sit in the woods and find the notes in nature.

Listen to the birds singing. Do you hear the half notes and microtones pouring from their throats? ...how that song ended on a single note when the birds settled into the tree? The greatest ragas must end like that, leaving just one note's vibrations on the air. Their songs are the spontaneous response to the world. That is truly music. (Mehta, 1993, p.203)

The music embedded in nature had perfection and beauty. She could love beauty wherever it existed, despite she did not find the beauty in her mirror image. Her attachment to the musician boy caused desire and sorrow when she withdrew her senses from the boy, and she could achieve peace.

Her father told her to meditate on the Narmada River which represents Shiva's forgiveness until she felt free from her attachment to her lover. She came to the river to get rid of her sufferings. The Narmada offered consolation to the musician's daughter who suffered from the selfish and materialistic world. "You release the wheel of suffering /you lift the burdens of the world. / O holy Narmada" (Mehta, 263). In addition to exorcising her grief, the Narmada would provide inspiration to her by evoking her desire in my music. "Evoker of Narma, lust, /Be known as Narmada" (Mehta, 1993, p.259). It has the power to heal her dead feelings. Love and desire are purifying emotions that can carry her beyond the worldly and materialistic frames.

In *The Minstrel's Story*, The Narmada appears as a nurturing and comforting motherly figure. This story is about Naga Baba, a martial ascetic, and Uma, a minstrel whose songs praised the Narmada. After going several tests of penances, the endurance of human limitations and training that longed for years, Naga Baba became an ascetic of a sect; he was respected and feared for his supernatural powers. He wandered the countryside and begged for food, bathed in the ashes of the cremated. On the night of Shiva, the Nagas begged at unclean, untouchable, or blasphemous houses, so he begged alms from a brothel house and accepted a little girl, Chand as alms. He saved this girl from prostitution and a miserable life of corruption. Naga Baba withdrew from the society and came to a dense jungle near the Narmada with this girl. The jungle on the banks of the river functioned as home and refuge for those who wanted to be protected from the violence of the corrupted world. The girl learnt harmonious co-existence with trees, animals and sustaining her life in nature. She learnt to drink fresh water directly from the teats of wandering goats, collecting pats of cow dung to be left in the sun to dry, looking for water snakes to find pure water to drink. Naga Baba re-named this girl as Uma, the daughter of Narmada. He immersed the girl into the water that became her new mother, and he said, "[t]he Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight, you become a daughter of the Narmada" (Mehta, 1993, p.241). Symbolically, the river washed off her past and she re-emerged from the holy river, her new mother, the Narmada. Uma was also identified with the goddess Narmada who was born from Shiva's penance and love. Uma's birth included the aspects of love and penance. "You are twice-born, /Once from penance, /Once from love" (Mehta, 1993, p.260). Naga spent years in teaching the songs of the river to the girl. She grew up to be a renowned minstrel of the Narmada under the guidance of Naga Baba and she was accepted to the temple festivals on the riverside of The Narmada as a singer-saint, she travelled from one temple to another. As a river minstrel, she chanted to the river that various animals such as turtles, river dolphins, herons, fishes, and crocodiles and various people such as bards, ascetics, gamblers, cheats, and dancers gathered in Narmada's embrace. The Narmada, like a mother, provides refuge and solace to all without considering their differences.

In *The Courtesan's Story*, The River appears as consoler of the pain and purifier of the sins. "You remove the stains of evil. / You release the wheel of suffering. /You lift the burdens of the world. / O holy Narmada" (Mehta, 1993, p.263). In this story, Mehta presents two victims of the corrupted society who created a world of love in the depth of the forest. Courtesan's daughter was kidnapped by Rahul Sing, known as the most dangerous bandit in the Vindhya. On the other hand, he was a victim of the corrupted society. When he returned from the Pakistani wars, his family was dead, and his lands were taken by a man whom local politicians supported. To justify his being a bandit who rebelled against the corrupted authority, Courtesan's daughter stated,

[d]enied justice, Rahul Singh only did what a man of honour would do. He swore vengeance on his family's murderers and killed them all. Of course, he has become a hunted man. But he has never harmed anyone who did not deserve it. (Mehta, 1993, p.174)

And Courtesan's daughter was also an innocent victim of the corrupted society. She was young, beautiful, joyful, and lively like an angel, presented love to everyone, and was not aware there were increasing indignity ugliness, evil, and corruption around her. Rahul Sing kept the daughter in captivity in a cave in the depth of the jungle. He restrained his desire, and he did not force himself upon her, he wanted to win her heart with respect. He believed that she had been his wife in many births before this one. She realized that he was right, she said, "guided by his touch, I learned I had known his body in a hundred lifetimes before he took me again a virgin on the thin cotton quilt which was all that shielded our bodies from the ground" (Mehta, 1993, pp.175-6). They fell under the spell of love and desire. They lived a happy life in the jungle. He decided to live like a common person but his deeds as a bandit could not be forgotten by the society. He risked his life for his love when he went to the bazaar to get something for her; he was killed in a police encounter. The girl ended her life in the water of the Narmada because she could not return to society as a bandit's wife; the Narmada claimed one of her daughters to console her sorrows



and protect her from the society. Her mother felt relieved that the Narmada would take away all her sins. The Narmada River cleanses sins, “the criminal offense of attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself in the waters of the Narmada” (Mehta, 1993: p.2).

In addition to the spirituality of the Narmada River, Mehta presents its significance in contemporary secular India. The river exists at the crossroads of the sacred and secular worlds. It is holy and loaded with religious myths and spirituality, and its physical power and interaction with the civilizations attract the people. Professor Shankar wrote his book, *The Narmada Survey*. He conducted an archaeological dig at the banks of the Narmada as “[t]his river is an unbroken record of the human race” (Mehta, 1993, p.254). Professor cared for the river’s immortality, which comes from its un-changeability rather than its holiness. Its permanence in its course makes it the same river for ancient and contemporary people: it flows without changing its course since its creation; it is a symbol of the flux of human life. It carries the traces of many civilizations. The sage Vyasa dictated the Mahabharata on the Narmada’s bank in ancient times; also, this riverbank became a setting for *Jungle Books* by R. Kipling. Professor only loved the river rather than worshipping it. He did not believe in the holiness of the river. He said, “[m]ere the mythology! A waste of time! If anything is sacred about this river, it is the individual experience of human beings who have lived here” (Mehta, 1993, p.253).

The novel is a journey for self-realization. The narrator’s self-realization implies eco-spiritual wholeness. Everything in this universe is related to each other, and human beings are only a part of the web of the creation. The narrator withdrew from the world before he learnt it. His friend old mullah Tariq Mia accused him of leaving the world without understanding it; he said “[h]ow can you say you have given up the World when you know so little of it?” (Mehta, 1993, p.47) His journey’s ending is prosperous: The essential self of the narrator developed, evolved, changed through the stories. The people he encountered since he came to the rest house were “like water flowing through [their] lives to teach [them] something” (Mehta, 1993, p.255). Professor Shankar stated that “you have chosen the wrong place to flee the world, my friend...too many lives converge on these banks” (Mehta, 1993, p.254). The narrator achieved knowledge by being exposed to the people whose stories filled out his knowledge of the traditions of the river and the world. Rather than passive withdrawal from the people and the world and choosing an isolated life; being in an active relationship with all things in the universe could provide knowledge, enlightenment for him to reason out the meaning of life. Tariq Mia reminded him that “you were brought [the banks of the Narmada] to gain the world, not forsake it” (Mehta, 1993, p.216). His renunciation from the world did not provide enlightenment to him. In the end, he wished to belong to the world he left. He preferred the action, “the rhythm of [his] previous life” (Mehta, 1993, p. 257) rather than a still and isolated life that is “untouched by the events of a larger world” (Mehta, 1993, p.256).

Throughout her novel, Mehta focuses on the theme of desire and love of a larger world; human love leads to divine love. The narrator was influenced from the power of love that motivated him to feel related to other human beings and non-human world. The epigraph repeats the love songs of Chandidas “Listen, O brother. / Man is the greatest truth. /Nothing beyond” (Mehta, 1993) in order to generate a specific context for the novel and to function as a summary. The end confirms the humanist value in the love song that favours the man who is in a relationship with other human beings rather than detached from them. Man can achieve enlightenment when he is attached to the society. This song stresses the interrelations of all creations, unlike the western humanism. Mehta combines reason, instinct, and spirituality in the modern world.

### III. CONCLUSION

This study offers an analysis of *A River Sutra* from an eco-spiritual perspective. It examines the ecological implications of Indian religions. This paper examines religious traditions in India which considers nature as important entity and part of the whole creation. While building an Indian identity in the context of cultural roots and traditions, Mehta highlights the relevance of nature to the divinity and human beings’ awareness and experience of their relationship with nature, the earth, and the universe. She surveys the meditative and ritual practices and the ancient tradition of preserving sacred river. This novel is a journey to the centre of the Indian spirituality that has inspired eco-spirituality with its perception of a sense of wholeness, holism, and self-realization. Living in peace with one’s surrounding is at the centre of spiritual life in India. The holy Narmada River plays an important role in Indian’s spiritual life. She highlights its significance in constructing cultural identities as well as being the source of the physical life. Six stories in *A River Sutra* include the stories that reflect aspects of the river. Six stories have the stories of a Jain monk, the murder of a talented musician, the seduction of an executive by a tribal woman, the abduction of a courtesan by a bandit, the physically disfigured musician girl and anthropologist who turned a Naga and saved a child from prostitution. The narrator functions as a sudradhar,

a storyteller and bound all these stories around the theme of the river. Deep ecology is more than a love of nature, it is a self-awareness that makes references to the connections between human beings and the nature and also it is an awareness that we live in the age of environmental crisis. Since the independence from Britain, India has exposed to huge irrigation projects, these projects function to destroy the traditional life in India, disrupt ecological and social justices. With the Narmada Dam Project, ancient deep-ecology based on traditional economy of living, the sense of interconnectedness of human and nature will be lost. Moreover, building dams could destroy important places of pilgrimage along the course of the river, which could wound their spiritual life. As a response to development, progress, science, and technology that create the cultural and environmental crisis, Mehta surveys Indian religions to be aware of co-existence of human and all the things in the universe, harmonious use of natural resources and maintaining the diversity of ecosystems.

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